

Counting the Cost

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And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? (Luke 14:27-28)



It wasn't much to look at. Just a base of gray concrete with a piece of painted aluminum embedded in it. Immediately behind the concrete was a small monolith, its angled granite face

simply engraved. It bore a small statement of fact, an engraved aircraft, and six names. Unless you knew the history, you would not understand the significance of the memorial. From a distance it really wasn't what you would think of as a way to remember. In fact, unless you purposely paid attention, you could easily miss it, even though it was not far from the entrance of Hanger 2.

When I saw it, I knew the significance of the memorial, having read about the incident some years before. The piece of painted aluminum was the patch of skin from the nose of the aircraft where the last four of the serial number is painted. The engraving was of an RC-135S, a Cobra Ball. The names were of the crew members that died that final, fatal flight:

Maj. William R. Bennett, Capt. Larry A. Mayfield, 1st Lt. Loren O. Ginter, MSgt. Stephen L. Kish, SSgt. Steven C. Balcer, SSgt. Harry L. Parsons III.

The statement of fact expressed the dedication of the members of the 24th Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron, and the 6985th Electronic Security Squadron to carry on the assigned mission until ordered otherwise – despite the cost.

The site of the memorial is a strange place. Situated where the Northern Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea meet, it is a place closer to Tokyo, Japan than to Anchorage, the leading city of the state to which the island belongs. The place is Shemya, Alaska. A tiny, windswept, cold, almost barren island 30 miles from the end of the Aleutian Island chain. To the North and West is Siberia. To the East, hundreds of miles away, is the Alaskan mainland. To the South, thousands of miles of open ocean. The only persons that inhabit this island are the military, and the civil service assigned here. Perhaps in their tour of duty, they might see the sun twice, such is the weather. But the RC-135S and its mission are the reason why they are here.

Strategic Air Command placed great demands upon its members, especially those of its reconnaissance wings. The reason such demands were required was clear to the senior officers and NCO's of the command: If the United States were to be secure from enemy attack, constant vigilance was required. The mission of the RC-135S, 24th SRS and the 6985th ESS were at the forefront of the battle for determining the capability of the Soviet Strategic Missile forces. Without regard to weather, time of day, or day of the year, if the Soviets acted, the Cobra Ball and its crew watched, often for 20 to 24 hours at a time. Only leaving their aerial station when relieved, or all activity on the other side ceased. It was as much a war of nerves and dogged determination as it was anything else.

On 15 March 1981, aircraft 61-2664 was returning to Shemya from Eielson AFB in Fairbanks. Having spent the previous night in Amber Hall, (named for a Rivet Amber aircraft that was lost over the Bering Sea in 1969) they had waited for favorable weather. When they left Eielson the weather was marginally acceptable, but in the four hours it took to arrive at Shemya, the weather at Shemya had become treacherous. Usually Shemya's weather was bad by normal standards, only it was more so this night. Fog, rain, snow and driving winds of 45 to 50 knots are common. The Cobra Ball crews are specifically trained and qualified to handle just such weather. However, this night had become exceedingly difficult: The crosswinds blew sleet and snow reducing visibility to nothing. As one report put it, they were now below minimum safe landing conditions. As they began the final mile to touchdown on the runway they descended in utter darkness unable to determine exactly where they were. Suddenly they found themselves low and off the runway. In an attempt to regain alignment the pilot began to turn the aircraft. At 2:30 A.M., Cobra Ball 61-2664's right wing impacted the ground. In the subsequent crash, six of the twenty-four crewmembers were killed. In the battle for the Cold War, six more casualties were added to the list.

I know that there are some who will say "This has nothing to do with me, why do you even bring it up?" Why do I have to know about an airplane that crashed over twenty years ago?

The answers are somewhat hard to express. We live in the present, established on the past, and are building something for the future. Do we know what we received from the past? How precious is that which we have received from the past? What do we choose to remember from the past? Or is it that we have become so wrapped up in our present that we have no care and concern for those things handed down by those who came before us?

What does it matter, the price paid for us to have the truth? If we have no connection with the past, it will not matter to us the memorials that are left for us. Those memorials are supposed to cause us to remember something – to have a connection with the events of the past. In that way they become real to us, those events of the past gain significance to us. Otherwise, they are just so many fairy tales, having no more weight in our minds than the fantasy story of Peter Pan.

For the 24th SRS, and 6985th ESS the loss of 61-2664 and 6 crew was not fantasy – it was, and is, reality. Even today, the memorial having been moved to Offutt AFB, Nebraska when the mission ended in 1994, the crash of 61-2664 has significance, and is real to those personnel assigned to strategic reconnaissance at Offutt. It is part of their history, their heritage. It is part of the definition of who they are.

Even so, the sacrifice of our Baptist brethren should be part of who we are. We did not come into this truth of God in a vacuum. We did not learn of the salvation that is by grace through faith because it was spoken out of thin air one day. No, someone passed this revelation of God's grace on to us, just as it was passed to them – by someone before them. How did they come to know? Yet again, someone before them brought the true message of God's grace. How did we get the word of

God: The Scriptures? Some church held fast the truth of the whole counsel of God, and its people were determined they would not let it slip. And yet, another church before it did the same – and another church before that one – all the way back to Jerusalem.

All along the way, brethren paid the price for that truth. Their memorials are written more in heaven, remembered by the Lord they served, than in the world. The world would like for us to forget they ever existed, and tries mightily to make us forget. Unless we make a direct and conscious effort to learn of our brethren that suffered to deliver unto us this truth of the Lord and His Kingdom, we will never know what price was paid for us to have the blessing of salvation. Instead we, like most of the people around us, would be bound for an eternity in Hell.

As I look at the picture I took of that memorial at Shemya, I am struck by the thought that the men who died that night, could have elected to be somewhere else. They could have chosen a different path. They could have still served their country – in a different unit, far away from this difficult island, and its attendant mission. No, they could have let someone else do it. Someone else could have missed their family for weeks at a time. Someone else could have risked their life to gather that information. They could have complained “Why do I have to do it.” You know, they didn’t do any of those things. They accepted the risks, the separation from their families, and they did not complain. You just don’t do that kind of mission without volunteering. They knew up front what they were getting into – and accepted it.

Because of their unwavering dedication and devotion to duty, the occasion of their death moved subsequent members of those units involved in the Cobra Ball mission to declare:

WE CARRY ON RESOLVED TO HONOR YOUR MEMORY

Brethren, what do we owe those who came before us? Is it possible for us to declare for our Lord and our brethren that we will carry on? Or, are we not moved by such sacrifices? If we do not carry on, we won't win the war. And we will have made ourselves the last generation.

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